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RR RUEHGR
DE RUEHBH #0362/01 1621249
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 111249Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY NASSAU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6440
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 000362

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KPAO](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BF](#)
SUBJECT: BAHAMAS MONTHLY -- MAY 2009

¶1. (U) This is a monthly report on a variety of topics of interest which do not merit full reporting cables.

-- Opposition Leadership Digging in as Economy Sinks?
-- Continuing Criminal Justice Crisis: Bad Guys Doing the Crime, Not Doing the Time
-- Another Temporary Hotel Closure, More Job Cuts Feared
-- Heavy Rains Soak Thirsty Island, Preview Upcoming Hurricane Season as Embassy Readies
-- Bahamas.com Reels in More On-line Tourists
-- Pageant Tempest: Miss Bahamas Universe Crown Disputed

Opposition Leadership Digging
in as Economy Sinks?

¶2. (SBU) The incumbent leadership of the opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), with ex-Prime Minister Perry Christie at the helm, appears to be digging in its heels as the economy sinks. Political observers now expect that the Deputy Leader of the PLP, ex-Deputy Prime Minister Cynthia "Mother" Pratt, will seek to remain in office beyond the next party convention in October 2009. She had previously signaled her intent to leave front-line politics for personal reasons, leading to a poorly-disguised and sometimes unseemly public competition among her would-be successors.

¶3. (SBU) The Deputy Leader post is thought to be a stepping-stone to the party leadership still tightly gripped by the former PM. If Pratt too remains in office, the door will be all but closed to ambitious activists aspiring to climb the PLP leadership ladder without challenging Christie directly. Despite the PLP's continuing infighting and poor reviews of its effectiveness in government and out, including the leak of an embarrassing report analyzing the reasons for their shock May 2007 election defeat, change may not be coming to the PLP anytime soon after all. The top PLP incumbents may now calculate that daunting economic troubles provide a favorable backdrop for a 2012 rematch with the governing Free National Movement.

Continuing Criminal Justice
Crisis: Bad Guys Doing the
Crime, Not Doing the Time

¶4. (SBU) A daily newspaper published figures in mid-May from a government report showing how many accused violent criminals were being released on bail -- possibly to commit more violent crimes -- leading to another outcry over the poor functioning of the criminal justice system and more criticism of the government's law enforcement performance. After a court of appeal ruling May 21 overturned a law denying bail to accused violent criminals, reactions from beleaguered anti-crime campaigners, church leaders, and ordinary citizens sharpened. Lawyers pointed out that judges retain the discretion to deny bail, but citizens fear that more violent offenders will pour into the streets as courts fail to try them in a timely manner.

15. (SBU) The Bahamian public is also beset by a seemingly endless spiral of crime and violence juicily reported in the daily news cycle. May was no different. Ex-Deputy Prime Minister Pratt witnessed a daylight bank hold-up while waiting in line for the teller. A "Wild West-style" street shootout ensued after bystanders intervened to stop a purse-snatching in progress: when the would-be mugger pulled a gun and began firing, another passer-by returned fire with a shotgun! In other demoralizing items, a 19-year old woman was killed and dumped in an open grave, while the head of airport security was shot during an apparent robbery attempt. With across-the-board budget cuts looming, Bahamian criminals are likely to keep doing the crime without much fear of doing the time.

Another Temporary Hotel Closure,
More Job Cuts Feared

16. (U) In the latest in a series of closures or layoffs resulting from the global economic downturn, Hotel Riu management announced they will close the hotel for renovations from August to December, the traditional slow season. The move will hit 300 hundred workers at the hotel, many of whom will be forced to use three to four weeks of paid vacation while the hotel is closed. The temporary closure follows in the footsteps of similar plans by the Wyndham and other hotels in The Bahamas. While Hotel Riu has not laid off any employees so far, many fear that staff reductions are the next step for the Paradise Island resort.

Heavy Rains Soak Thirsty

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Island, Preview Upcoming
Hurricane Season as
Embassy Readies

17. (U) Sun-seeking tourists were disappointed but at least some rain-starved locals celebrated a two week-long series of sometimes violent thunderstorms bringing heavy downpours in late May. At first the rain brought much-needed relief to parched lawns and gardens, but the island was thoroughly sodden by the end of the month. Lightning reportedly struck the airport control tower May 25, temporarily disrupting flight operations, and the sustained rainstorms flooded roads, complicated already congested traffic, and caused power outages again May 29.

18. (U) All of it amounted to a preview of the upcoming hurricane season, which kicked off June 1. Embassy Nassau preparations are well under way. Post hosted the visit of a senior USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance official, who met with local emergency agencies and the Hurricane Action Committee May 27. Post also hosted two hurricane preparedness town hall meetings, separately providing employees and American citizens with guidelines and encouraging everyone to begin preparations now. The National Hurricane Center predicts a normal Atlantic hurricane season in 2009. As always, Embassy Nassau is hoping for a quiet season but preparing for the worst.

Bahamas.com Reels in More
On-line Tourists

19. (U) The Ministry of Tourism and Aviation said the new tourism website -- www.bahamas.com -- has been a huge success. The ministry reported a 24 percent increase in the number of hits to the website in April 2009 compared to April 2008, and a 10 percent year-to-date increase in visitors despite the economic downturn. The website was launched in October 2008 and includes the ability to book trips to The Bahamas directly from the site. It also boasts interactive maps of all the diverse Bahamian islands, which the ministry hopes to individually brand as travel destinations. The Tourism Ministry has also begun promoting special events on-line -- the promotion of the

filming of the U.S. television show "Scrubs" in Abaco earlier this year brought 17,000 visitors to the website. Ministry representatives said visitors that booked vacation packages on bahamas.com average 64 percent more in value than those booking in other ways.

Pageant Tempest: Miss Bahamas
Universe Crown Disputed

¶10. (U) In perhaps the least consequential yet most heated of current social controversies, the title of Miss Bahamas Universe 2009 -- not to be confused with Miss Bahamas World, also chosen in early June -- is being disputed by backers of disgruntled contestants, as well as by many ordinary viewers of the event who immediately concluded that the fix was in. The much-coveted crown was taken by a well-known vocalist and front-woman of a local band, but many cried foul at the outcome as suspicions of a rigged process reverberated throughout the country. The judges' justifications appeared to do little to assuage the outrage as the final tally was upheld. Nota bene: the Miss Universe pageant will take place at Atlantis, Paradise Island this August, showcasing the new Miss Bahamas Universe -- as elected -- on a global stage without ever leaving home.

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